

THE AMAZONS: Gatecrashers in Secret Water? Peter Hyland

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Peter Hyland argues that Nancy and Peggy shouldn't really have been there at all.. .

But there were no eels on the flag that suddenly fluttered from the mast head. The flag was black, with something white on it.

'Skull and crossbones,' said the Mastodon. 'Well I'm blown. Whoever can it be?' 'Hey!' Titty was shouting at the top of her voice. 'Hey!' 'Ahoy!' shouted John. 'Ahoy!' yelled Roger. The arrival of the Amazons in *Secret Water* is one of those occasional heart-stirring events which are carefully planted in Arthur Ransome's stories, and it has to be said that in this case some sort of thrill is overdue. We are at the close of Chapter 10, a third of the way through the book, and although all the ingredients for adventure have by now been assembled (the 'marooning' of the Swallows, the mysterious hoof-mark, the discovery of the Mastodon, the distant threat of the Eels), there has been a strange quietness, lethargy almost, in the plot. AR's own anxiety about this shows through in Chapter 11:

'Gosh,' said Roger. 'Things'll happen now.'

'Looks to me as if they've begun,' said Nancy.

Nancy's loyal reply is not quite convincing. It's almost as if she knows she's been sent for to liven things up. An SOS almost. Why couldn't the Swallows and Eels have managed on their own?

A clue may be found in one of AR's earlier ideas for the story. In this version, which he considered 'promising', the Swallows were to be genuinely marooned on the island, without a boat, and were to encounter the Mastodon on the run from two other children and a dog. They help the Mastodon to escape, and later build a raft together. There was going to be an exceptionally high tide ... It does indeed sound promising. If Ransome had stuck to this theme, there would have been a brisker opening to the book. Commander Walker was to borrow *Goblin* and deposit the Swallows on Horsey Island. They would have been catapulted into adventure straight away. Instead, the published version gets off to the slowest start of any of AR's stories. For the first ten pages (Chapter One – 'Farewell to Adventure'), John and his crew are gloomily kicking their heels at Pin Mill without a boat or prospect of one. This is surely too long. 'Disappointment' starts were a favourite device of AR's, and usually work well for him – think of Dick and Dorothea rallying when they

realize *Teasel* isn't sailing (CC), or when they are turfed out of Beckfoot (PM). It is an ingenious way of testing the children's emotional resilience and at the same time turning the plot in an unexpected direction, but the trick is to get the action moving again as quickly as possible. In *Secret Water* this does not really happen until the Swallows make camp on the island, and this is perhaps a bit late.

The chosen location does not help – wonderfully mysterious, but charged with that melancholy calm which all tidal areas possess. Even Titty and Roger seem subdued by it. Should the 'war' have started earlier? What about AR's original idea that the Mastodon was being hunted by enemies? Should the Eels have been a lot less remote, with Daisy taking over the 'Nancy' role? There must have been many such options open.

Even as a child, I had doubts about the arrival of Nancy and Peggy. Of course, it was always good to meet them again, but I remember having a slight feeling of resentment that they had muscled in on the adventure. To cap it all, they went and sided with the Eels, instead of standing by their traditional allies! My view has not changed since – in fact, on reading the book as an adult I was struck by the artificiality of the reading of the telegrams in Chapter 11, when the Amazons are explaining the mechanics of their arrival. Once again, Commander Walker has had a large finger in the plot, and there is a feeling of manipulation.

It is not as if Nancy and her sister play key roles in the remainder of the story. After the 'blood and iodine' episode, they really do no more than provide some additional energy and an extra boat and crew. Nancy attempts to acclimatize herself (one might almost say ingratiate herself) by the use of 'Great Congers and Lamphreys' or 'Wriggling Elvers' in place of her usual expletives, but it is significant that the most dramatic event in the book – the near-disastrous Red Sea crossing -concerns the three youngest Swallows. And who rescues them? The Mastodon, with the Eels lying at hand. Who needs the Amazons?

Well, obviously AR did. We will never really know why he had difficulty with *Secret Water*. Perhaps after PP in 1936 and WD in 1937, in both of which he excelled himself, the well of inspiration had run temporarily dry. It was 1939, his publishers were no doubt pressing him, and he may have become desperate to stitch his ideas together into a publishable story before war was started in Europe. The result can be summed up best in Christina Hardyment's words: 'there is yeast in the air'.

After all this, please don't get the impression that I dislike SW. I return to it again and again. Flawed genius is always fascinating, and, despite everything, the story has a haunting momentum of its own, like the water creeping through the reeds and channels. What other writer could have created such a saga out of a bunch of children camped on a mud flat? As for Nancy, the apple of AR's eye, I suspect that the truth of the matter is that he had little choice. Here were

sailing boats, a camp, a new ally, possible enemies and not a native for miles
– how could she possibly have been kept out?

Photo: **Not welcome at all? The Amazons arrive.**